SPECIAL EXHIBITION

Porcelain, No Simple Matter

Arlene Shechet and the Arnhold Collection

May 24, 2016, through April 2, 2017

For this special exhibition, The Frick Collection invited New York–based artist Arlene Shechet to select about one hundred eighteenth-century pieces of Meissen porcelain from the renowned collection of Henry Arnhold and install them in the Portico Gallery, along with sixteen of her own porcelain sculptures. Shechet's inventive installation richly extends the context of both the eighteenth-century pieces and her work.

Although porcelain was manufactured in China as early as the seventh century, its production remained a mystery in Europe until 1709, when the alchemist Johann Friedrich Böttger succeeded in producing white porcelain. Until then, porcelain had been known as "white gold," as it was available in Europe only through imports from China and Japan. In 1710, Böttger's patron, August II, elector of Saxony and king of Poland, established a porcelain manufactory in Dresden, the seat of the Saxon court. So determined was he to keep the formula a secret that he relocated his manufactory to the secure clifftop castle of Albrechtsburg in Meissen, fifteen miles outside of Dresden. The Meissen factory has remained there, in continuous production, ever since.

Henry Arnhold's parents, Lisa and Heinrich, began collecting Meissen porcelain in 1926, when they lived in Dresden, acquiring mostly tablewares, vases, and objects of royal or noteworthy provenance. Henry followed in their footsteps, becoming a patron of the arts and an avid Meissen collector.

In a recent interview with exhibition curator Charlotte Vignon and Arlene Shechet, Mr. Arnhold recalled: "By the time we left Germany [in 1937], the Meissen collection was quite substantial. Shortly after I came back from the army after World War II, I got married and started to set up a home. By then, my mother had moved to an apartment in New York, and she was quite happy to share things with both me and one of my sisters who also had moved to New York. I made myself a little collection at home, and when professionals—whether artists, collectors, or museum people—came to see my mother's collection, they also came over to see mine. In the late 1980s, the art historian Maureen Cassidy-Geiger came up with the idea of publishing a catalogue of my collection; and at that point, I became very involved again, a real activist in terms of my collecting. I also took Maureen on trips to what was called Leningrad at the time and to Prague, Florence, Paris, Dresden, and Munich—everywhere. Well, *l'appetit vient en mangeant* [appetite comes with eating]—that's what the French taught me."

Not only does Mr. Arnhold have a great appetite, he also has an unfailing eye—one that guided the acquisition of each of the pieces in his collection, including the objects illustrated below, which are included in the exhibition.

By contrast, Arlene Shechet's interest in Meissen porcelain came completely by chance, when a few years ago the curator and art dealer Peter Nagy, who knew Shechet's work and its relationship with historical material, recommended her for an artist's residency at the Meissen factory. Although Shechet had worked for many years with

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All works illustrated were made at the Meissen Porcelain Manufactory. Unless otherwise indicated, works are on loan from the Arnhold Collection. Those by Arlene Shechet are courtesy of the artist.

THIS PAGE
Exhibition display with Arlene Shechet's *Big Dragon* (bottom, center) and *Three Hundred Years* (far right and far left), juxtaposed with Meissen porcelain, ca. 1725–35

OPPOSITE PAGE, LEFT TO RIGHT
Saucer and Tea Bowl, ca. 1720, decorated outside the Meissen factory, ca. 1745, promised gift from the Arnhold Collection

Freemason Couple Taking Chocolate, model by Johann Joachim Kändler (1706–1775), ca. 1745

Small Two-Handled Bowl with Cover, 1735 or 1738, model by Johann Joachim Kändler and/or Johann Friedrich Eberlein (1696–1749)

clay, she had no previous experience working in porcelain and was excited by the opportunity to explore this very technical medium onsite at the Meissen manufactory. "The allure of spending time inside a functioning factory [was] extremely compelling. As a child in New York, I used to tell my parents there were two things I wanted to be when I grew up: a farmer or a factory worker. Thinking about that in recent years as I work in my studio, I realize that being an artist is, in many ways, like being both a farmer and a factory worker. I'm growing things and generating a vision. I'm not completely in control and am always aware of a process that's bigger than me. As a child, I always wanted to know how things were made or came into being. It was the beginning of figuring out that I needed to be an artist. I'm still deeply interested in the process of how things grow. I grow things in my studio and also in my gardens. I believe art and nature are very aligned."

Made during her residency at Meissen in 2012 and 2013, Shechet's unique compositions reflect her fascination with the process of making porcelain. For example, she created *Mix and Match,* one of the exhibition's featured works, by using eighteenth-century molds from the Meissen archives. Each element of the fanciful sculpture was cast separately then decorated with a different color or pattern. After her first few weeks at Meissen, Shechet realized that the molds were the

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Installation display with Shechet's *Bug Plate* (2013) and a mounted group (ca. 1728–30), model attributed to George Fritzsche (ca. 1697–1756), with gilt-bronze mounts, probably French, promised gift from the Arnhold Collection

OPPOSITE PAGE, LEFT TO RIGHT
Fluted Bowl, ca. 1730

Arlene Shechet (b. 1951), *Scallop Bowl,* 2012

core of all the porcelain produced at the factory since the eighteenth century—"almost like the factory's DNA." To communicate this idea in her works, she attempted to link the molds' industrial imagery with the very refined aesthetic of porcelain. To accomplish this, she made molds of the factory's three-hundred-year-old plaster originals then cast them in porcelain, turning industrial objects into fine works of art. The exhibition includes Henry Arnhold's *Fluted Bowl* (opposite page, left) paired with her *Scallop Bowl* (opposite page, right), a mold work that was created by casting the *Fluted Bowl*'s original plaster mold in porcelain. Her fascination with the process of making porcelain can be seen in the visible seams, cracks, and drips that are often found on cast and hand-painted works, as well as her inclusion of the mold's inventory numbers on the surface of her sculptures. Shechet painted and gilded each piece at Meissen according to traditional manufactory techniques, but fused her works with her own language and sensibility as seen in her interpretation (page 11, bottom center) of the painted decoration of Meissen's famous "Red Dragon" service.

Although Shechet's compositions are undeniably linked to eighteenth-century Meissen production through the historic molds and traditional techniques used to create and decorate them, they also differ radically from their earlier counterparts. Since its founding, the Meissen factory has produced pieces that are cast and painted by hand but are produced as unlimited multiples. The artists and craftsmen working in the factory make only minor decisions about the pieces' final appearance, which is predetermined by the existing molds and traditional painting techniques. In contrast, each of Shechet's sculptures is unique, conceived and created entirely by her. However, since Shechet made these sculptures at the Meissen factory, they are all signed with the factory's blue crossed swords, the mark of the Meissen factory since the eighteenth century.

Shechet's installation eschews the typical chronological or thematic order of most installations in favor of a personal approach that opens an intriguing visual and technical

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dialogue between the contemporary and the historical. Her installation is inspired by the domestic setting of The Frick Collection's galleries, which are characterized by a combination of objects, textures, colors, and materials. Shechet turned to objects from the permanent collection when designing the display cases for the installation, taking as her inspiration, for example, the early eighteenth-century French desk by André-Charles Boulle that is currently in the Living Hall. Likewise, the green damask behind the exhibition's display cases evokes the museum's fabric-covered walls.

The exhibition's location in the Portico Gallery, overlooking the museum's historic Fifth Avenue Garden, reflects Shechet's wish to extend the exhibition into the garden while simultaneously bringing the natural world indoors. For this reason, plexiglass was chosen for the two pedestal-tables near the Portico Gallery's floor-to-ceiling windows in order to offer an unobstructed view of the garden. The theme of the exhibition also derives from its location, with the featured pieces selected for their evocations and depictions of nature, an important source of inspiration for artists working at the Meissen factory as well as for Shechet.

The integration of Shechet's work with porcelain from Mr. Arnhold's collection creates a kind of *tableau vivant* in which the objects—figures, cups, teapots, and vases—seem to come to life, a direct reference to the eighteenth-century European concept of animating inanimate objects. The display also references late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European gardens that invited contemplation of art and nature, as well as contemporaneous "porcelain rooms," in which walls were covered with hundreds of pieces of porcelain, often arranged by color. As in these historical settings, surprise and delight are at the core of the installation; look for porcelain birds mounted overhead in the Portico's rotunda and large Meissen animals outside, their stark white a dramatic contrast to the garden's greenery.

The exhibition's title, "Porcelain, No Simple Matter," was chosen by Shechet and is meant as an entreaty to the viewer to look more closely and prepare to be surprised. For Shechet, as for Arnhold, these beautiful objects are not simply dishes or figurines or painted knickknacks—they are carefully considered works of art. By exploring the complex history of the making, collecting, and display of porcelain, the exhibition offers a unique opportunity to reevaluate and reexamine a medium, a *matter*, often taken for granted.—*Charlotte Vignon, Curator of Decorative Arts*

"Porcelain, No Simple Matter: Arlene Shechet and the Arnhold Collection" was organized by Charlotte Vignon, Curator of Decorative Arts, The Frick Collection. Major support for the exhibition is generously provided by Chuck and Deborah Royce, Melinda and Paul Sullivan, Margot and Jerry Bogert, and Monika McLennan.

Ms. Vignon would like to acknowledge Stephen Saitas, Joseph Godla, Patrick King, Arthur Fowler, Adrian Anderson, Chelsea Maruskin, Catherine Feck, Henry McMahon, and Lucas Ruggieri for their help in creating this unique installation.